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THE HUMAN COSTS OF DEVELOPMENT FUNDING CUTS IN THE CENTRAL SAHEL: WHY DONORS MUST STAY ENGAGED



NORWEGIAN
REFUGEE COUNCIL

Recommendations¹

To development donors and IFIs:

- **Stay engaged in the Central Sahel region by finding alternative funding modalities, with specific attention to national and international NGOs.** Local and international NGOs can implement large projects spanning across emergency and development. L/INGOs have the best access and acceptance from local actors allowing the scale up of essential services that were previously covered through central budget support. Among alternative modalities, **donors should look into investing into ‘cost-efficient pooled funds and existing N/INGOs consortia.**
- **Adopt a stronger people centred approach, with emphasis on basic needs, such as health, education, clean water and sanitation, as well as resilience and livelihoods.** To advance the sustainable development goals (SDGs) and leave no one behind, development donors need to increasingly stay and deliver in fragile and conflict affected contexts. **The EU could replicate its approach to support the Afghan people,** where it adopted a funding package with a focus on vulnerable populations, despite the suspension of development cooperation with DfAs.
- **Live up to Nexus policy commitments in the Central Sahel by ensuring funding in support of nexus approaches in fragile contexts,** including contexts that have undergone an UCG. The HDP Nexus approach (as defined by [OECD DAC recommendations](#)) was introduced in response to an increasing number of protracted crises and in an acknowledgement that development investments are needed in fragile and conflict-affected contexts to break the cycle of repeated humanitarian response.
- **Ensure that development and humanitarian funding allocations are proportionate to needs and fragility for Central Sahel:** the increasing cuts in development and humanitarian funding during the past years have been a consequence of many factors, including (but not only) the prioritized support to specific crises such as Ukraine. Commitments to populations around the world shall be equitable and proportionate, despite political ties.

Become more adaptable when investing in fragile and conflict-affected contexts.

Uncertainty is the only certainty in these contexts, and donors should be prepared for different scenarios, with flexibility and adaptability built into the funding scheme, allowing for example switching recipients and other modifications with a light and fast bureaucratic amendment with decision-making taken at donors’ field office level. Adaptability of funding mechanisms is key not to lose development investments that donors made for many years with taxpayers’ money and keep basic services running for populations avoiding further suffering and instability.

To political leadership in donor governments and institutions:

- **Maintain dialogue and diplomatic relationships based on equal terms and values.** The population needs and how to reach them shall be the focus of the discussions. The integration of local and cultural values into discussions is key to building collaborative cooperation with Central Sahel governments.
- **Foster necessary diplomatic engagement to contribute to unimpeded access to humanitarian assistance and application for international norms such as international humanitarian law (IHL):** Donor governments and IFIs need to ensure the protection of humanitarian space and respect for the humanitarian principles that have proven essential in allowing humanitarian actors to continue to operate in conflict-affected contexts.
- **Depoliticise aid:** Humanitarian donors must protect the principled nature of humanitarian funding and action. In cases where donors deprioritise development funding for a country following a UCG, it must be assured such decisions do not spill over and result in decreased humanitarian funding for the contexts. Humanitarian funding should be based on humanitarian needs alone and not be impacted by political interests.

Introduction

With global humanitarian needs skyrocketing and the humanitarian funding gap increasing year after year as more crises become protracted, and in some cases multifaceted, donors have made clear policy commitments, under the [OECD DAC recommendation on the Nexus](#), to increasingly invest in development and prevention in fragile and conflict-affected contexts. The aim is to reduce humanitarian needs by addressing the root causes creating vulnerabilities. However, such fragile and conflict-affected contexts are often politically unstable and can at times experience unconstitutional changes in government (UCG). While most donors continue to fund humanitarian action in contexts affected by a UCG, development donors and international financial institutions (IFIs) often suspend, freeze or withdraw development funding in these situations.

These suspensions can have dramatic consequences for the population, leads to decrease in terms of access to basic services (such as health, education, water and sanitation), **weakening of livelihoods, and potentially fuel instability.** Suspension of development funding often requires already overstretched humanitarian actors to fill the gaps in basic services, putting an additional burden on the underfunded global humanitarian system. This advocacy note has been developed based on a research study led by NRC. This report entitled “WEATHERING THE STORM. Why and how development financing actors should stay engaged during political crises” will be released in May 2024 and examines the consequences of development aid suspensions in five contexts, namely Burkina Faso, Mali, Niger, Myanmar and Afghanistan. The findings are based on desk research and semi-structured interviews with key stakeholders, including UN agencies, INGOs, donors and NRC staff, and are complemented by additional analyses with specific attention on Central Sahel countries and the European Union development funding.

1. A widespread suspension of development funding with some alternative modalities

Overview of the suspension of development funding in the three Central Sahel countries

Since January 2021, several unconstitutional Change of Government (UCG) happened in the three Central Sahel countries¹. Traditional development donors’ first step following the UCG was to suspend any direct budget support to the de facto authorities (DfAs).

In Mali: France was the only government donor that publicly suspended all development aid for Mali in 2022, which resulted in the Malian authorities banning projects operating with French development or humanitarian funding. This heavily impacted some INGOs, especially the French ones. One of them reported that it led to a loss of almost 3,5 million euros, impacting long-term interventions in the sectors of health, nutrition, food security and water and sanitation, especially in Gao. Other government development donors, including Germany, Canada, Denmark, Norway and the US, also suspended direct budget support to the central government and associated line ministries. Sweden later announced suspensions of

¹ January and August 2021 in Mali, January and September 2022 in Burkina Faso, July 2023 in Niger

development aid to Mali and Burkina Faso linked to the countries' support of Russia in the UN Security Council more so than the UCG itself)².

→ *Focus on the EU: Out of the 2021-2024 envelope of EUR 373 million, the AAP for 2021 was suspended, and there was no funding decision adopted for 2022 and 2023. An Annual Action Plan (AAP) was adopted for 2024, with a budget of EUR 95 million, without any budget support. Therefore, **there could be EUR 278 million** to be reallocated (including grants foreseen for NGOs and International/EU entities to work in cooperation with authorities).*

In Burkina Faso: The US suspended USD 160 million in development funding in February 2022. In August 2023, France announced a full suspension of development funding for the country, following the de facto authorities' statements of support for the UCG in Niger. France had a significant development budget for Burkina Faso at EUR 482 million in 2022, including EUR 13 million in direct budget support. Other development donors also suspended direct budget support for the DfA. After initially stopping disbursements, the World Bank, International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the African Development Bank (AfDB) have all reengaged in support of development gains. As mentioned above, Sweden later announced suspensions of development aid to Mali and Burkina Faso linked to the countries' support of Russia in the UNSC more so than the UCG itself.

→ *Focus on the EU: Out of the EUR 384 million multi-year envelope for 2021-2024, the AAP for 2021 (EUR 200 million) was suspended. There was no funding decision adopted for 2022, the EU cooperation restarted in 2023 with an AAP envelope of EUR 153 million. Therefore, there should be EUR 231 million remaining for 2024. The geographic focus announced for 2024 has changed dramatically, moving from fragile areas affected by the conflict to areas considered safer.*

In Niger: on 5 August 2023, the US temporarily suspended parts of their development funding amounting to almost USD 200 million. France suspended all development assistance and budget support to Niger, amounting to EUR 120 million in 2022³. The World Bank (WB) froze all disbursements, except for some limited private sector interventions. The WB portfolio amounted to USD 4.5 billion, including USD 600 million in direct budget support between 2022-2023⁴. The African Development Bank has suspended its support to Niger but recently announced that they were ready to relaunch its initiatives with the country⁵.

→ *Focus on the EU: Out of the EUR 503 million multi-year envelope for 2021-2024, the AAP for 2021 was allocated EUR 300 million, the 2022 AAP EUR 21 million and the 2023 AAP EUR 61 million. However, following the UCG in July 2023, up to 80% of projects may have been suspended. Meaning that there could be up to EUR 168,8 million remaining for 2024.*

² <https://en.sputniknews.africa/20240105/sweden-to-stop-development-aid-to-mali-over-countrys-support-for-russia-at-un-reports-say-1064479486.html>

³ Niger loses aid as Western countries condemn coup | Reuters

⁴ <https://www.arabnews.com/node/2348646/world>

⁵ <https://www.nigerdiaspora.net/les-nouvelles-du-pays?view=article&id=20385&catid=34>

For some donors, the suspension of funding is a legal requirement, as is the case for the US, where the State Department's appropriations act automatically calls for a suspension of development cooperation when a government has been deposed by a military coup⁶, or as is the case for the World Bank. In accordance with the WB's operational policy 7.30⁷, all disbursements on projects under implementation are suspended in cases where there has been a UCG and where the DfAs are contested. To restart disbursements, a reassessment needs to take place to determine whether an appropriate legal framework has been put in place and if the country complies with the bank's criteria for reengagement⁸. The decision of when to undertake a reassessment and consider reengagement is made by the bank's board. The WB has already restarted engagements and disbursement in Burkina Faso and Mali, and a reassessment has been recently undertaken in Niger.

For other development donors, **the suspension of direct budget support is based on a political decision** to pause the development cooperation while the bilateral relationship was reassessed.

EU Development budget revision: impact of development aid cuts

In December 2023 the European Council reached a provisional agreement on the budget revision (all but Hungary) and decided on EUR 2bn cuts in development aid funding instrument NDICI-Global Europe. Discussions on implementation of such cuts are now ongoing within the European Commission.

Within the framework of these budget cuts, INTPA would adapt its approach to Africa and other regions (Asia and Latin America) to focus on two priorities: Global Gateway (GG) and migration. **This could mean cuts of up to 90% of the bilateral envelopes (including budget support) for African countries such as Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger when not of "strategic" importance (Global Gateway) and not in a position to cooperate (migration).**

The focus on fragile contexts will no longer prevail (peace, security and governance will no longer be prioritised in EU country envelopes but only through regional budget, gradually by the end of MFF).

⁶ <https://sgp.fas.org/crs/row/IF11267.pdf>

⁷ [Operations Manual \(worldbank.org\)](#)

⁸ These criteria include: 1) Legitimacy: The de facto government must demonstrate legitimacy in its control over the country or territory. 2) Recognition: The Bank considers whether the government is recognised by the international community or by other countries. 3) Effective Control: The government should exercise effective control over the country or territory, including administrative functions and decision-making processes.

Change of modalities by traditional development donors – good practices

Development programmes can continue after a UGC, here below some examples of good practices by traditional donors in the Sahel and other contexts.

- **Change of the recipients of aid, moving away from working with government authorities, with a change of priorities**
 - Work with INGOs and fund consortia of L/INGOs (especially where they are already existing): examples in Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger. Switzerland, which had an infrastructure project with the Niger government, adapted the project to be implemented by the Swiss INGO, Helvetas, following the UCG. In Mali in 2024, after 3 years of suspension or lack of financial decision, and in Burkina Faso in 2023, the EU restarted cooperation in both countries, with a shift in implementing modalities (from State budget support to indirect management and direct grants) and of priorities. In Burkina Faso, the 2023 Annual Action Plan (AAP) was implemented via indirect management with UN and EU MS agencies mainly, and some direct grants open to NGOs.

- **Change to implementation modalities and program activities**
 - Allow partners to work with local authorities and line ministries / technical departments, without cooperating directly with the central leadership: examples in Mali and Niger. In Mali, NGOs with German development funding in Mali were allowed to continue technical engagements with the Malian DfAs and support for authorities at local levels. In Niger, Switzerland's decentralised development approach allowed the Swiss Development Cooperation (SDC) to continue to work with municipalities and regions in Niger, while direct collaboration with the central government was paused following the UCG. Donors interviewed by NRC who used this approach had found that there was less risk of political interference at these local and technical levels, compared to collaboration with the central level authorities. This is also in line with Chatham House's recent research that recommended donors to ring-fence subnational state entities that can operate independently from the central level authorities to stay engaged in politically estranged settings⁹.
 - Work at community level through intermediaries to continue enrolling the implementation of wider-scale development project: examples in Mali and Niger. While Denmark was phasing out parts of their country program in support of local governance and decentralization reforms in Mali following the UCG, they were able to adapt development funding for interventions at a community level, applying Nexus and localization approaches. In Niger, Belgium announced its ambition to continue community-level support within the education, agriculture, and health sectors¹⁰. Although this approach can be a temporary work-around in the absence of more central-level intervention modalities, it cannot address the systemic, structural changes often needed to ensure economic development and service delivery in a context at scale.
 - Refocus on basic human needs interventions: examples in Burkina Faso and Mali. In Mali, the EU shift in implementing partners when restarting cooperation in 2024 came with more focus on education, climate, economic resilience, support to women and

⁹ <https://www.chathamhouse.org/2023/04/aid-strategies-politically-estranged-settings>

¹⁰ 'Supporting local population': Belgium not suspending development aid to Niger after coup ([brusselstimes.com](https://www.brusselstimes.com))

youth, whereas in Burkina Faso, priorities in the 2023 AAP (after 2 years of suspension or no funding decision) moved away from security and State strengthening towards economic resilience and basic social services. However, this refocus on human needs or basic services hasn't always translated in funding for projects to be implemented in fragile and conflict-affected areas, moving away from all efforts to prevent vulnerable populations' situation to further deteriorate and increase the caseload of populations in need of humanitarian assistance. In Afghanistan, the EU adopted a significant package focusing on basic needs and livelihoods, in spite of the UCG, which is not something that has been decided or implemented for the Central Sahel countries, despite growing needs¹¹. In Burkina Faso, it was reported that the WB and African Development Bank (AfDB) have reengaged since the UCG, but with a stronger focus on basic needs, which requires less direct cooperation with the government.

- **Other good practices to stay engaged in contexts with an UCG**

- Flexible programming: more flexible programming modalities are needed to ensure continued development programs in fragile and conflict-affected contexts that have undergone a UCG. Good practices include building crisis modifiers into programs. One NGO operating in Mali for example described to NRC how a development donor had designed a program, which contained a list of context developments that would trigger a set of pre-determined adjustments in the program design.
- Projects in support of Nexus approaches: nexus funding can also help Examples of donors supporting nexus approaches can also be highlighted as good practice to stay engaged in contexts with an UCG. This was seen when one donor funded projects that combined both development and humanitarian funding, or when several donors funded consortiums that encompass both development and humanitarian capacities and outcomes. In Mali, Denmark, for example, allocated both development and humanitarian funding to Danish implementing partners to ensure programming across the Nexus.
- Using another funding channel: pooled funds. No example for the Central Sahel countries. In Myanmar for instance, following the UCG, the EU Delegation funded the Nexus Response Mechanism (managed by UNOPS) to implement innovative, flexible, and rights-based activities at the nexus of the humanitarian, development, and peace sectors. No example of such transfers was found in the region, despite the existing OCHA-led regional pooled fund, or the Sahel Regional Fund (SRF), put in place by FCDO. Pooled funds can allow development donors that do not want to be seen to support or legitimise the DfAs to maintain a low profile while investing development funds in a country. Pooled funds can also be a way to make interventions more 'sellable' and less risky to donor capitals, as donors would only be funding part of a larger intervention. Lastly, pooled funds can also be a way to circumvent restrictive donor conditionalities, as the funds are combined with funds from more flexible donors.

Despite these different modalities or good practices for continued development donor engagement following a UCG, overall development funding levels decreased in all three contexts. Often, only existing and budgeted development projects were implemented, while new frameworks were delayed, decreased, or not introduced altogether. Several country-based

¹¹ [Afghanistan: EU reinforces basic needs support to the Afghan people with a new €142.8 million package - European Commission \(europa.eu\)](https://ec.europa.eu/afghanistan/en/afghanistan-eu-reinforces-basic-needs-support-to-the-afghan-people-with-a-new-1428-million-package)

representatives of development donors explain that decisions about continued development engagements are driven from capitals, and therefore it's imperative that the donors' embassy or country office demonstrate that they can quickly adapt their development portfolio to continue to deliver development outcomes. If budgets are unused, cuts imposed from capital level become more likely.

Step up of non-traditional donors to fill the gap?

When traditional development donors suspend or freeze funds following a UCG, one question that arise is whether new non-traditional development donors come into the context and fill the gaps left behind by the disengagement of traditional development donors. Although the available information is quite limited, with no transparent, accessible data on development funding provided by non-traditional donors, which are usually also not included in traditional donors' coordination structures, it appears that some of them either maintained their development cooperation following the UCG or increased other types of interventions or investment in the country.

In Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger, increased Russian interventions following the UCGs have been reported. There were also reports of maintained or increased Chinese investments, and Turkey was also reported to be increasingly involved in the region. So far there is little information on humanitarian and development assistance provided by Qatar, Saudi Arabia and other gulf countries in the Sahel despite ties with the region have been dating back since centuries and the political relations where maintained after the UGC. .

2. Consequences of the suspension of development funding

Impact on populations' basic needs and resilience

The three Central Sahel countries had received significant development investments prior to the UGC, which made the suspension of development funding impactful on the DfAs ability to deliver essential services.

This was the case in Niger, where, prior to the UGC, the government was highly dependent on foreign aid, which according to the WB constituted 11% of Niger's GDP. This was an important contribution to running the public sector in one of the world's poorest countries, where access to public services was already reported to have been minimal. With the suspension of WB disbursements, especially for education and livelihoods, and other donors' development assistance, as well as the significant impacts of the economic and financial sanctions imposed on Niger, the government struggled to finance the state budget and introduced significant cuts to public spending.

The Government of Niger was also actively involved in addressing food insecurity before the lean season. During the lean season of 2023, 3.3 million people, making up 13% of the population, experienced acute food insecurity. Government and humanitarian efforts provided food assistance to 3.1 million people, of which, alone, the World Food Programme (WFP) assisted 1.2

million during the lean season¹². However, the UCG and following tensions and sanctions prevented the disbursement of \$1.2 billion in aid in the sector¹³. **Such suspension in aid may reverse gains and exacerbate hunger and malnutrition in Niger, worsened by climate change and conflict.** Other food security projects are also facing the risk of suspension. WFP has collaborated closely with the governments of Sahel countries, since 2018, including Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali, Mauritania, and Niger, on an integrated resilience program. This initiative was aiming to establish robust and sustainable food systems, enabling communities to access locally grown nutritious food. In Niger, the program helped half a million people to no longer require humanitarian assistance in 2022 and 2023, saving \$54 million in government emergency response during the lean season. This is quite significant as 3.2 million women, men and children (12% of the population) are projected to face acute hunger during the 2024 June-August lean season. However, despite the positive results, in February 2024 this program was facing risk of reduction and suspension due to funding shortages¹⁴.

In Mali, the example of the impact of the suspension of a project on health and social cohesion

In Mali, the suspension of a 4-year development program implemented by a consortium of three INGOs and three National NGOs coincided with the end of some MINUSMA funding and the withdrawal of other bilateral cooperation donors, particularly in the regions of Segou and Nara. The early and immediate cessation of this project led to the following suspension:

- More than 9.000 young men and women no longer receiving long-term support for creating micro-enterprises and restoring livelihoods.
- 247 community health workers, supporting the health of more than 20.000 individuals (malnourished children, pregnant and breastfeeding women) no longer being supported.
- 160 well-repair artisans and over 16 water point management committees, benefiting 500 households, no longer benefiting from improved structuring for clean water services.

According to members of the consortium, **the interruption of actions will affect protection efforts, social cohesion, as well as any emergency interventions** requiring actor participation to ensure continuity or post-emergency measures. An abrupt cessation of activities, without a smooth transition, risks compromising the progress made within the nexus framework, appearing to backtrack on its objectives.

Similarly, in Mali, the health and education sectors were previously relying heavily on development funding. One NGO reported that a 5-year project had not been renewed following the suspension of funding by the development donor, even though that project was aiming at improving more than 40.000 adolescent girls' access to inclusive education.

Stakeholders interviewed by NRC emphasised that the consequences of the decrease in development investments would not to be visible from one day to the next but would rather lead to a gradual loss of already achieved development gains and a decline of key development indicators. As one interviewee highlighted, **the decline of development gains is unlikely to make international headlines as the consequences will only be visible in the longer-term as opportunities and resilience are depleted.** Interviewees also highlighted that the lack of

¹² Niger 2023 WFP Country Report, <https://reliefweb.int/report/niger/niger-annual-country-report-2023-country-strategic-plan-2020-2024>

¹³ WFP/WB joint analysis on the socioeconomic impact of the political crisis, December 2023

¹⁴ [WFP calls for urgent support to safeguard resilience programmes in The Sahel as funding dwindles | World Food Programme](#)

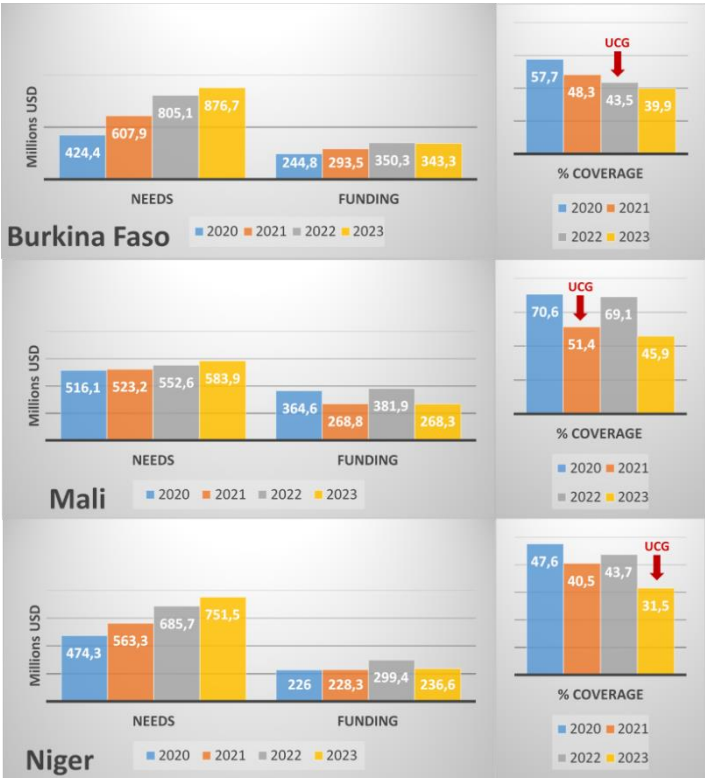
development investments were likely to create negative coping mechanisms such as increased level of child labour and sexual abuses, selling of livestock and farmland and economically motivated migration in search of livelihoods.

Decrease in humanitarian funding alongside development funding: the risk of politicisation of humanitarian aid

While development funding, as part of bilateral development cooperation between two countries is political in nature, humanitarian funding must be protected from being used to further political objectives. In this way, humanitarian funding must be allocated with impartiality—responding to and reflective of the level and severity of humanitarian needs. Humanitarian funding therefore must not be impacted by development donors’ disengagement following a UCG.

However, **in all three central Sahel countries, humanitarian funding decreased alongside development funding following the UCG. This was the case even though humanitarian needs increased over the same period.** Consequently, the central Sahel countries were all severely underfunded and **can be referred to as neglected crises.** At the end of April 2024, the HRPs are dramatically under-funded, at 7,6% for Burkina Faso, 8,8% for Mali and 5,9% for Niger.

Several people interviewed by NRC described a general lack of appetite from traditional donors to invest in Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger linked with the political reaction to the UCGs in the three central Sahel countries between 2020-2023. According to them, this reluctance not only affected development funding but spilled over to humanitarian funding. One interviewee described how the Malian government’s perceived hostility towards the West has led to donor governments investing their humanitarian financing elsewhere, except for BHA that has maintained their level of humanitarian funding. At the same time, access constraints and administrative impediments imposed by the DfAs on humanitarian actors were also reported to have led donors to lower humanitarian funding allocations to Mali. Access constraints for humanitarian actors were also highlighted as a reason for some humanitarian donors to not allocate additional funding for Burkina Faso, with some donors calling NGOs and UN agencies out for asking for additional humanitarian funding without being able to implement projects with the current access constraints.



Humanitarian financing and needs in the central Sahel countries from 2020 to 2023 (source: fts)

Although it did not transpire from interviewed stakeholders, it appears that access constraints and bureaucratic impediments could have made the humanitarian responses in the three countries costly and more challenging. In Mali, some donors have challenged the call for more funding by the humanitarian community, arguing that humanitarian access should be demonstrated to prove that the potential disbursed money would be implemented on the ground.

Across all three countries, humanitarian funding did not appear to be protected from being tied up with political objectives. However, interviewees also emphasised that the decrease or lack of humanitarian funding could also be a result of competing priorities. **Some argued that the UCG had been an incentive for donors to reprioritise humanitarian funds to other contexts where needs are also high, but the contexts are less politically estranged such as Ukraine.** The expanding global humanitarian funding gap, where humanitarian donors are struggling to fund an increasing number of humanitarian crises, was also highlighted as an important factor impacting the underfunding of the five examined case study contexts.

Growing humanitarian needs and over-reliance on humanitarian funding

Humanitarian needs have increased in all three contexts following the UCG. It is not possible to scientifically evidence or quantify the direct link between the suspension of development funds and the increase in humanitarian needs, considering the complex set of overlapping factors such as the aftermath of the covid-19 epidemic, the consequences of climate change, political and economic instability, isolation of the country, the impacts of economic and financial sanctions, as well as increased levels of armed conflict and displacement in the three central Sahel countries.

Many stakeholders interviewed by NRC emphasised that the lack of development funding had likely contributed to the increase in humanitarian caseloads. They highlighted how the lack of investment into prevention, livelihoods, resilience and basic service delivery such as health care and education resulted and will keep resulting in vulnerable population groups needing to rely on urgent humanitarian assistance. They also highlighted that the increase of people in need of humanitarian assistance was not only a consequence of armed conflict and disaster, but also often linked to the broader economic decline of the contexts, with some people affected by poverty that would meet the threshold for humanitarian assistance, although they could have been absorbed in a more sustainable development program if available.

As heavily reliant on foreign aid and budget support prior to the UCG, **health and education** are sectors where the consequences of development aid suspensions can be most impactful and **where humanitarian actors can then be overloaded from trying to fill the gaps left behind from the disengagement of development donors and IFIs following a UCG**. In Mali, following the UCG and the decline in development funding, humanitarian actors interviewed by NRC reported that some people previously accessing services through the public health system were now seeking health care in humanitarian-funded mobile health clinics and emergency health facilities in IDP camps.

Impact on education in Niger

In Niger, the Global Partnership for Education (GPE) has been a crucial initiative supporting the national education programme, but political instability and tensions have halted its implementation. Despite efforts by other development and humanitarian actors to continue to support education in Niger, none can fully replace the assistance provided by the GPE, in cooperation with the government. This situation has left many children without access to education during the past months, affecting their prospects and perpetuating cycles of poverty and vulnerability. This is the case for GPE but also for at least other three projects reported by other organisations in Niger, which, after the coup in July 2023, did not receive the development funding needed to continue or start the education projects.

The suspension of the GPE will also have consequences for humanitarian assistance for education. A rapid response project, currently implemented by a consortium of INGOs, including NRC, aims at assisting children in emergencies and supporting vulnerable schools. However, the lack of financial support to the education system affects the children's re-integration in the national schooling system. When development aid does not step in when it is supposed to the sustainability and progress made by other emergency-focused projects are jeopardised.

These decisions not only affect children but also have broader consequences for communities, where a chronic school dropout can become a bigger insecurity problem. Without sustained support, the positive results made in the education sector in Niger funded by traditional donors for decades are at risk of being eroded.

In Mali, where interviewees reported that levels of food insecurity continue to increase because of conflict and increasing food prices caused by the effects of sanctions, inflation and the wider economic crisis in the country. With a severely underfunded HRP, humanitarian actors are struggling to respond to the mounting needs for food assistance and with the suspension of development aid, several clusters were forced to revisit their priorities to avoid gaps in the response. At the same time, humanitarian actors expressed frustration over the reliance on humanitarian assistance, with the prevention food insecurity appearing to fall between the cracks of humanitarian and development assistance and the funding streams available. Many highlighted that more sustainable support for food production, climate change adaptation and pastoralist practices is needed to prevent the same food insecurity reappearing year after year and to graduate people away from a dependence on short-term food assistance.

The failure of the humanitarian-development nexus

Stakeholders interviewed by NRC highlighted that **the humanitarian response was prolonged due to the lack of longer-term development responses for people to ‘graduate’ into.** In Burkina Faso, for example, one humanitarian actor explained how many conflict-affected communities continue to rely on water trucking for up to four years, which is only supposed to be a temporary measure. Despite water trucking not being a cost-efficient way to respond to sustained needs for water, except for BHA, humanitarian actors had not been able to convince humanitarian or development donors to fund new boreholes. The same was the case for the shelter response, where most humanitarian donors only funding the procurement of temporary plastic tents that have an estimated lifespan of 3 months to a year given the impact of the harsh climate and environment in Burkina Faso. As many IDPs tend to remain in protracted displacement in Burkina Faso, humanitarian actors found themselves replacing emergency shelters again and again, while request for shelter support from the growing number of newly displaced persons continued to grow. Given the underfunded humanitarian response, many humanitarian donors were reported to strictly prioritise activities related to the emergency response, but without the availability of complementary development investments, such short-term responses were found not to be cost-efficient and not create the best quality response for displaced persons.

Humanitarian assistance has been essential in saving thousands of lives and bring dignity to people affected by conflict in the three Central Sahel countries. **There is a real question, however, regarding needs that could have been and could be addressed with more sustainable outcomes through development interventions.** Humanitarian interventions are designed to address the most urgent needs, but too often, short-term humanitarian interventions are being used repeatedly to support the same people for years on end, without helping people achieve longer-term outcomes. This overreliance on short term humanitarian assistance has been aggravated by the suspension of development funding. For example, in Niger, some humanitarian donors are worried about the increasing needs and the pressure it is putting on the already limited humanitarian funding. One of them said that humanitarian donors and actors do not have the means to respond to all the crises, particularly to “structural crises” that are beyond humanitarian financial planning and operational capacities.

Humanitarian actors and humanitarian funding cannot and should not be expected to fill the gap when development donors and IFIs suspend, freeze or decrease development funding in a context following an UCG. Not only is it not sustainable, but it also further constrains globally limited humanitarian resources. In addition, repeated short-term humanitarian assistance is often not a dignified response to the needs of people affected by

protracted crisis. Humanitarian actors interviewed for NRC study frequently expressed frustration about only receiving funding for short-term interventions such as temporary shelter, water trucking and mobile health clinics in protracted crisis. **This speaks to the urgency of ongoing system reform efforts, and to the need to better coordinate and fund the grey zone between development and humanitarian interventions in fragile and conflict affected contexts.** While policy advancements have been made on the operationalisation of the HDP Nexus, there is a need for increased political will to invest development financing in fragile and conflict affected areas, including contexts that have undergone a UCG. Without development interventions that address underlying, structural root causes and vulnerabilities, and strengthen systems, capacities, services and structures, affected people risk remaining dependant on humanitarian assistance and, contrary to policy objectives, humanitarian spending risks continuing to increase year after year.

3. Consequences for the humanitarian organisations and their access to the populations in need

A shrinking humanitarian space

In the three central Sahel countries, some traditional donors have taken position of non-engagement in line with policy objectives not to legitimize the DfAs, but at a various degree (in Niger, immediately following the UCG, most of the donors suspended their engagement with the DfAs whereas their position had been more pragmatic for Mali and Burkina Faso). This lack of development and diplomatic dialogue consequently put humanitarian actors at the frontline of any engagements with the DfAs, which resulted in additional pressure on humanitarian actors and experiences of shrinking humanitarian space. In all three examined contexts, stakeholders interviewed reported that the DfAs have introduced more restrictions on humanitarian actors operating in the contexts following the UCG, which had led to shrinking humanitarian space and access constraints.

Lack of development funding feeding growing lack of acceptance of international organisations

There have been increasing calls in the past few months by Burkinabè authorities to integrate more development/resilience programming into the humanitarian response. At a time marked by strained relations between Burkinabè authorities and humanitarian organizations, the drop in development funds might further drive a wedge between both parties as humanitarian organizations, even those with a dual humanitarian and development mandate, are likely unable to deliver on that request due to the lack of available development funding in addition to the chronic underfunding of the humanitarian response. Development funding cuts in Burkina's current context therefore risk further deteriorating humanitarian actors' acceptance among authorities and the wider public.

Similarly to Burkina Faso, in Niger the perception and acceptance of humanitarian aid is being affected. The increasing shrinking humanitarian funding and suspension of development funding don't allow humanitarian organisations to reach all the populations in need. Cuts in development aid, and the reduction in humanitarian funds, is affecting the perception of humanitarian actors and of principled humanitarian aid.

CONCLUSION

Despite an initial suspension or freeze of direct budget support for the DfAs following a UCG, there were ways for development donors and IFIs to adapt their development interventions and stay engaged in support of people in Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger. Such continued development investments require flexibility, adaptability and innovation. However, overall development funding levels have decreased in all three countries. This underlines that **continued development engagement likely depends more on political will than on the programming and funding tools available. This calls for a clear separation of political agendas from the pursuit of development outcomes in fragile and conflict affected contexts.**

Vulnerable populations in the Central Sahel worry about their daily subsistence, their security and their family needs. With the adoption of the 2030 Agenda, UN Member States pledged to ensure “**no one will be left behind**” and to “**endeavour to reach the furthest behind first**”. In this case, not only the Central Sahel population is being left behind, but they can be also considered as one of the “furthest behind”, according to the Human Development Index. The Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger populations’ needs are increasing, and the international community and **UN Member states shall remain committed to these populations by endorsing a real people-centered approach, and by increasingly depoliticising aid.**